

JOSEPH : AN ETHICAL AND BIBLICAL STUDY.

VII.

“THE SECOND TO PHARAOH, THE SAVIOUR OF EGYPT.”

(GEN. XLI. 37 TO END, AND XLVII. 13-26).

WE can imagine how this passage in the life of Joseph would glide swiftly and triumphantly along on the lips of those who rehearsed it during those gloomy years when the tribes of Israel remained in bondage. For it was doubtless in that period of cruel isolation after he died that this story got its rhythm and natural, smooth-lipped music. The telling of the story is the earliest form of all literature; if the Hebrews had not the habit and the art, then they were in this alone among the nations. But we know that in the time of Moses they had it and had it impressively; for, when he would allusively suggest the silence and awe which come with death, he could find nothing more familiar and striking to say than “We spend our years *as a tale that is told.*” History took its first elementary shape when, in idle hours around the hearth or under the village tree, men recited what they remembered or what their fathers had told them; then, to the motion of the hands and the rise and fall of the voice, the narrative of fact became harmonious and tuneful and the story flowed to the measure of the ballad, till, on the lips of the naturally selected man of imaginative heart and glowing eye, the facts became grouped and heightened and dramatically interpreted to old and young who gathered round. What a thrilling word, ever in season, the tale of Joseph—the man whose coffin they kept among them as an ark of covenant—must have been in the huts of the tribes all through those generations

of their exile and bondage! The telling of it must have been a large part of their religion; the memory of it their largest hope. The unconscious intellectual pains which, under the pressure of a strong moral emotion, these men who told it took with this story have made it to us the literary treasure that it is—a precious stone so polished that every vein of mystic meaning is shown in its own beauty and so set that it glances on the breast of this Book in its continual ministry. But, to those who ever and again heard it told in the gloom of Egypt, the life itself must have shone with glory; and from it an inspiration must have come into their lives—an involuntary and sacred veneration as they felt themselves in the presence of a human spirit that was elect of God.

Because it is a transcript of vital human history from these far-off times, the whole tale to us is still full of gesture and tone; and in this passage the narrative composes itself to its free strength. The strain abates; the suppressed struggle of a silent patience ceases; the insult and injustice, which overcast whole chapters, now withdraw; the dismal rooms of his life open and Joseph comes forth to the unshadowed light. His life task is now before him; and it will employ all those energies which his earlier difficulties have developed. The biggest bit of work, which the world of that day had to have done, was assigned to him; and he stood up to it as if it was the substance of which all his previous toil had been but the anticipatory shadow. In his night of hardship he has neither drowsed nor collapsed. He is a man of strong, uninjured soul, of instinctive and swift spiritual precision, and with an untiring and tenacious brain. If Egypt in such a crisis can be saved, the second to Pharaoh will be its saviour; for Joseph stands beside the throne with an intellect that has no superior and a

character as reliable as his intellect, and having his whole manhood irradiated because he had the Divine in his soul.

The intenser interest of Joseph's life slightly slackens here when, after so long an effort, he is seen like a strong runner sweeping towards the goal and with his race as good as won. But, lest our interest slacken too much, we must remind ourselves how, in splendid self-control and patient training, he has equipped himself for the work that he now takes so calmly in hand. His enlightenment as he stands by Pharaoh has come because in the house of bondage and in the cell he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. To have managed himself against such odds before was a harder task than to manage Egypt now. So we must not be dazzled when we see Pharaoh put his ring on Joseph's hand and a gold chain about his neck. He is not a whit greater when all do him homage than he was when he did Potiphar's housework; he was not more truly the first man in the empire when all the senators did him honour than he had been in the closed corridors of the jail. There was in what befell Joseph no chance or merely empty honour, but rather the recognition of worth by one of the stateliest senates that ever sat. Solemn and slow-spoken, Egypt's senators sat in halls of stone, massive and portentous men and grave of debate. Not of fickle humour, but majestic even in change, they pronounce for their country's best. They answer to their king—these motionless men of counsel—that they cannot find such an one as Joseph, a man in whom the spirit of God is. He was chosen in an hour of crisis to be the first because he was believed to be the best. Thus, over all the princes of the land, there is set by Pharaoh's side a lad of thirty years of life and thirteen of trial, whose only hap up till now has seemed to be misfortune, a foreigner of fair counten-

ance and broken speech, a waif Hebrew (vaguest name by which one man could then call another!) of drifted foot from some far-away beyond the flood. But misfortune has not dragged his soul to earth nor has sin deformed him; he has the mysterious about him and the keys of mysteries in his hand; and, because years of stress and famine are imminent, he is set thus high to teach senators wisdom.

Life is by no means the game of chance which to superficial observers it may seem and which it suits some who write for a season's favour to say that it is. It is a game of the intensest skill, in which on the whole only the best win. A general without much plan may make a brilliant dash and succeed, but campaigns are won by the steadiest calculator; any one of us may make a move at hazard and not lose, but the world has hidden wheels within it of adjustment too accurate and of balance too finely loaded to permit of any one toying or tampering with its levers and handles. Indeed to utilize and keep successful time with the world, a man needs to have his whole nature—physical, mental, emotional and moral—not only in harmony and balance, but also under the instantaneous control of a will whose pressure he can instinctively graduate as circumstances demand. On such a man the world ultimately appears to wait as if to do his bidding, and for him in their courses stars seem to fight. His success may be delayed, but it is sure, for he is in his own being in touch with God, and the order and course of things are in his favour. Such a life, though it be (as men say) unsuccessful here, is only a life unfulfilled; it demands opportunities and outlet elsewhere and in larger worlds; death may release when the clamorous world has baffled, and the poor wise man who never had the city to save here is entitled to have his ten cities to rule somewhere. The Divine arrangements in

the succession of worlds are connected and continuous. Judged and measured by the scale which human nature carries in its own breast, and which gives a Divine contradiction to many of the world's standards, to merit success is a greater thing than to succeed, and to be worthy of reward is reward indeed. Many lives of time have bonds and claims on eternity; for many, as steel-true to duty and God as Joseph was, have stood by no throne and only passed from their dungeon to their scaffold.

A good deal of millinery and show was incidental to Joseph's new position as the second to Pharaoh. The king took a ring off his own hand and put it on Joseph's; he "arrayed him in vestures of fine linen" and gave him a gold chain and the second chariot, and he bade the people bow to him as to one invested with royalty. If we can read Joseph's nature aright, even when we have made large allowance for all his Asiatic emotion, we think that these elaborate arrangements must have been a trouble to him rather than a pleasure. He was no wiser in this array than he had been in his prison garments; but on the whole there perhaps was less pride and affectation in wearing the garter and the star of Egypt than there would have been in refusing them. Joseph had Pharaoh to serve and Egypt to save; and, with a task before him so vast and demanding so imperiously to be done, he would not stickle about his livery. He was neither the better nor the worse for his robe and its ornaments; the size of the man is measured inside the swathing of clothes. The gaufered linen might be a great thing in the eyes of the Egyptian populace at first, while there were regular harvests and plenty and peace; but the moment they discovered that lean famine had advanced in the night and bivouacked in their fields they would all look to the *man* and not to the way he was caparisoned and mounted. Pharaoh was doing only super-

ficial, showy work when he decked his viceroy for the eyesight of all Egypt; but he was more intense and serious than this outward adorning of Joseph showed. In all that he was only flaunting to the staring crowd, while with admirable purpose he was silently executing vast counsels with this seer out of their sight. With an awe that suggested reverence for what lay beyond Joseph, Pharaoh called his minister by a name of reverence and awe, because he deciphered the secrets and had access to the thoughts of God. It was the instinct of a fine insight which made the dream-disturbed king veil the face and form of this man whose intercourse was with God amidst these vulgar trappings of common authority. No one knew better than Pharaoh that to Joseph's high spiritual power these insignia all but did dishonour; and he himself would have been the first to resent the wearing by another of those signs of authority if he had not realized that Joseph represented a kingdom "not of this world." But, with his whole soul searched and vibrating, Pharaoh called him Zaphnath-paaneah; for, through Joseph's transparent, crystalline soul, the spirit of God shone apparent and the tokens were unmistakable that, because famine was near, God had "sent a man."

There are many things worse for a nation than famine and crisis. The pinch of famine and the stress of trial at any time will, if they do no more, bring out *men* and set them in the front; and if the world need anything, it needs to have every now and again its men sifted and assorted. Easy times are the nation's most perilous ones. England was on the crest of the age when most of her living sons were born, and we call her with satisfied hearts the queen of the world's countries; so an element of leisured indolence and a splendid contempt runs the risk of intruding into our life. Our king does not now need to be the man whose battle-axe can ring soundest on the helmet of our

foe, or whose brain can solve the most knotted problem that the times have tangled. Our ideals from time to time need revision. Where there are no ideals, where there is no *vision*, the people perish—languishingly and slowly; but when the ideals are those of luxury and sloth, then decay eats the heart of nations with swift teeth. Our favourite young man in times of long ease is apt to be he who minces the neatest on the street or the carpet; and when days of long peace get fringed with sloth, it may seem sufficient to assent to our religious creed by the politest of little bows. No awakening can be too rude to any nation in such a case; no clap of war's thunder can break too near it, nor traitor's thrust surprise too soon. When crisis or famine comes, it is seen what stuff men are made of. Then the ablest becomes king; then the favourite youths are those of metal who stand where scars are won; and then men go to worship, not in trim garments and with gentle pace, but with both work and will in their mien, and they grip their sword when they say their creed. Let no son of any land we know and love be deceived into carelessness and sloth because there is plenty all around! As things are arranged now, every citizen and son of the empire has a word with the king and a place by the throne, and each one should equip himself and stand in unfurried readiness, as if all depended on him alone. Everything now in the nation is resting on the preponderance of the good average man. The years of plenty will pass and those of famine come in succession so long as the world lasts; and to every man who has trained himself and is fit, as to Joseph, come his opportunity and his call.

By means of these symbols of authority Pharaoh identified Joseph with the throne, and afterwards, by his marriage to an Egyptian, with the people and the country. For "Pharaoh gave him to wife Asenath, the daughter of Potipherah, the priest of On, and Joseph went out over all

the land of Egypt." This fact seems to have many references and to give many suggestions; there is a light in it which gives many gleams as we turn it round in our hands and its facets one after another catch our eye. Now it seems a strange alliance, as if Joseph, wedding into the midst of representative heathenism, were unfilial and unfaithful to his fathers and their God; only was he not an-hungered when he thus went into an unholy temple and ate the bread which was not lawful? Again it presents another aspect when we think how wise-witted Pharaoh was to bind up Joseph's personal life with the interests of the people through a union which associated him with the priests, wielding (as they did) a power that all the land believed to be unselfish! Still further the fact appears to flash light in myriad rays into many dark places remote and near, when we realize how the true religion from the first has had the instinct and power to ally itself with the world's intelligence and culture, and to appropriate men's finest hopes and fears, and with a kindly hand train these up towards a covenant God and guide them to His heaven as their home. This last aspect of the fact, whether it was the one that flashed in the eye of the man who wrote it in this Book or not, is the one of fullest and of permanent lustre. Its is the light that fills our eyes across history as we turn round the many faceted fact of Pharaoh's Hebrew premier marrying into the household of Egyptian priests and becoming an Egyptian by alliance with Egyptian life where that life was most unselfish and universal and divine. It was a significant day in the world's essential history when Pharaoh wedded the man who had the secret of Jehovah into the family of the priest of On in Egypt.

This city of the priests, On of the ancient, and Heliopolis of classic, ages, was the centre of long-ago culture and thought. It was the focus point of the light of those far-

off times. There men raised high their lights of earth until they were touched by the light of worlds unseen; and fed at two Divine sources—the one of man and the other of God—the light so shone that it melted darkness all along life's paths and scattered it beyond life's horizon. There thus early was fostered what is still the *culture* of the world—knowledge raising men to reverence, the faithfulness of search giving place to humility and worship in the presence of the Unsearchable! Thus, in On, long before Athens was built or Alexandria had its libraries, was being swaddled and cradled the thought of our Western civilization; and, while the Pharaohs were ruling by their outward power, the priests of On were guiding the throne by their wisdom. Amidst green fields these wise men of Egypt chose their home and reared their sacred city of pillared granite; and while they from their silent studies taught men to know, they in their temples taught them to worship. A deeply religious people was this nation by the Nile; its power and its life were while it feared its gods. They had their dim, far-away thought of the one God, "the Father of Beginnings," who made other gods and then passed away; and they worshipped the many gods who came after. There in On they worshipped the great god Ra, the sun god, the god of all penetrating essence, of the present, and of work. Practical people they were, and they worshipped as the highest a god who presided over the work to which every morning's light called them!—but a thoughtful also, and they, while they turned to worship as he was daily born in light in the east, did not forget in the evening to turn their eyes to the west, where their dying god lay down in darkness! For they had not only their god of the day, Ra the sun god, who rules the busy present; but they had their Osiris, the god with the keys of the invisible and with the scales of justice and judgment, the god of the hereafter. It was with Potipherah, the priest of this suggestive worship

in On, that Joseph was allied in wedlock and all its tender affinities; and again we say that it was a significant alliance, as if thus early, in Joseph, the sacredness of work was recognised in that religion which was to be the stem of Christianity, out of which, when the times were ripe, grew the great principle, "I must work the works of Him that sent Me." That principle took shape not so much on the lips as in the life of One who in faithful working seemed as if of the house and lineage of Joseph, when He came to be the Saviour of the world.

It may be accepted as certain that the Bible at this point is not framed so as to set before us in every detail a model ruler, when it tells us how Joseph administered Egypt. It only tells enough of his precarious position and his hard task to prove to us the worth of character, and to show how men succeed who rely on God. At the same time, just as his splendid personality is in the story surrounded by some glittering drapery of the court and set where the weird power of the priests touch it, so his strong, straight grip of Egypt's difficulty is shown us with just enough of incident to make it picturesque. The work was well done; the calibre of Joseph, both intellectually and morally, was adequate to the vast strain; but only at one or two turns in his Herculean task are we allowed to see how he worked his hand. It came to be an almost superhuman effort he had to make when for seven years nature in her course passed earth's children by like a stony-hearted stepmother and starved them of bread. "For the famine was very sore, so that the land of Egypt and all the land of Canaan fainted by reason of the famine." Circumstances so exceptional demanded exceptional administration. A man who lacked either wisdom or decision, who was the slave of his feelings, and feared to be strict and severe, was not the man to be Egypt's premier in such a crisis. There true benevolence

needed to be conditioned by a wide outlook and by stern justice. True kindness to Egypt involved its being ruled with a very firm hand. Severe enough Joseph's rule seems to have been, for he "gathered up all the money that was found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan for the corn which they bought." And even the cattle and the lands of the people came with the sore years into the absolute power of Pharaoh through Joseph's rule. There was only hard bargaining without a semblance of benevolence until money and cattle and lands were taken and the people were stripped bare. Yet the nation was trustful and grateful. They felt that Joseph was so good and so just that they could trust their dearest personal liberties to him, and they said, "Thou hast saved our lives; let us find grace in the sight of my lord, and we will be Pharaoh's servants." This admiration and gratitude are filtering clear and pure through all the wrong and ruin of Egypt's intervening years; and to-day no name is spoken by Egypt's peasant lips with more affection and pride than that of Joseph.

It might not be quite a fancy if we found in this finely-tempered narrative some foreshadowing of all just and progressive legislation. For it is not unsuggestive when we read that Pharaoh through Joseph came to an understanding with his people, and drew lines from the throne to every humblest cottage door, binding himself to abide by them on his side if they did so on theirs. This was at a time when there was not even a word for *law* as we now understand it, and when caprice and usurpation and a knowledge of his will were the only acquaintance a people had with their king, and their only experience in transacting with him. Suggestions also might come from the arrangements by which the lands of the priests were exempt from the bond laid on those of the people, and by which also the king became trustee of the nation's interests; and a little

ingenuity might trace and outline the shaping of things towards constitutional government. Still, such a handling of the Word of God lends itself, even when we are least aware of it and least intend it, to deceitfulness; and to coast along by such eddies and shallows instead of following the strong central current means, sooner or later, but inevitably, that we shall get entangled and stranded in this spiritually majestic Book. Its moral pressure and force are all in one direction and are continuous from page to page and book to book as its volume swells, and these are inerrant in their power to give direction and strength to every soul that is set on duty and seeks its God. All these incidents and details as to Joseph's administration of Egypt form but the channel along which flows the shining truth that God carries on an ever-widening purpose amidst all the accidents and chances of human history, and that His chiefest instrument in the world's weal is a human life sworn and constant to His will. This man whom Pharaoh instinctively discovered to be what generations of subsequent history proved—one whom God "*sent before*"—contains in his life the strong lessons of these pages. He stood the test of high service, at a perilous post and through years of unrelieved strain, in Pharaoh's palace; but then he had stood a sorer test in Potiphar's house. By the throne and before the world he stands every inch a man and without an uneasy feature in his face. Can we believe that he could have looked Egypt in the face as he did if there had been either man or woman in the land at whose name he would have blushed? A man's morality is the backbone of him; shake one of his vertebræ, and you loosen every joint in his frame. A man who has failed in Potiphar's house will not be the man he was meant to be, even though he stand before kings. Suppose he had fallen and gathered himself together afterwards;—suppose (to use

a bold figure) he had broken and mended himself again—could he have stood as he now stands before the world, handling himself and Egypt with such easy strength and grace? If there be even a strong knot in the rope a man works with, it will jerk and strain and chafe when the hand comes to the place; and, though there be a clasp of new strength round where the bone broke, that limb will hesitate and fail before its companion.

Should we be jaded by reading and seeking to realize how great Joseph was, or should our eyes be tired of gazing at him in his splendour near the throne, the narrative has some relief for us. We are permitted for our refreshing to feel the throb of the human pulse in this hero, and we may for rest hear a tone or two of his soft home voice. Leave the senate where his word is law, and the palace where even Pharaoh cannot say him "nay," and the public street and the highway where before his proud progress every knee bends to the bare ground, and come home with him and hear how in the house he calls his two boys by name! Hear the tenderness and tremble in his voice when he first calls "Manasseh!" Men ask, "What's in a name?" and we answer, "Much, very much, in this one." Much, very much, was in it when Joseph first framed and said it; and much it meant in Joseph's ears when he called it or heard it called all through the house day after day. Great seas of sad memories first heaved and surged under a high and happy influence, and, as if under a new and sacred spell, then began to sway themselves in noble rest, when Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh; for "God," said he, "hath made me forget all my toil and all my father's house." He had kept a calm face, and a brave heart in a silent breast, all those thirteen years of durance and wrong; but in this name "Forgetting" we may learn how deep and intense had been his sense of hardship, and how sore the

suffering and weariness which had pervaded his life. We may also infer the deeper anguish of his soul—the disappointment, the fruitless return, of his far-travelled thoughts which ever strayed towards home and absent ones while he lay in prison, and the craving of his deepest nature for recognition and the right.

But now he must leave these sad things that are behind ; he must bury his dead past ; he must lay aside that weary weight and run with patience ; he must work and that without whining ; he has put his hand to the plough and must not even look back ; he must take Egypt in hand, and, without embarrassing sentiment towards either his own country or his father's house, he must save it. All this feeling is finely folded up in the name "Manasseh," for he felt that he was compensated for all he had suffered and sacrificed when he looked on and loved his firstborn boy.

New emotions were awakened when a second son was born ; and his name was an index of a higher level to which Joseph's soul had ascended. In his unchosen task, and on the lines of his unlikely fate, he not only reached resignation but came to consolation. After the hard season, during which winter storm made him stubborn-rooted, he not only stood unshaken and strong, but spring came to him and his life blossomed and became fragrant. God's countenance now looked favourably on Joseph, and he was comforted. He buried all his toil and sorrow in "Manasseh," and his life rose to rest and joy in "Ephraim." Those who heard this tale oft told by the fireside and the cradle would need no interpreter for the silent allegory within these two home words of Joseph's choosing ; the two names of the two lads would sing their own meaning far into the heart of every Hebrew. But there is a Spirit in charge of these names in this Book, whose office it is to write them with instruction

on human hearts still. Burying and resurrection must go on wherever there is life—the burying of sad pasts and the rising to new and fuller life in the present. We cling to sorrow awhile, sometimes too long. We refuse “for a time and times” to be comforted. We claim griefs “cruel fellowship,” as if a passionate attachment to pain were the just sequel to the severed companionship of love. It seems unkind to a friend who has died to allow ourselves to be happy without him; we grudge ourselves our bed at night when we know that the cold wind is wandering round his grave, or we refuse to be comforted if the uncertain sea has taken his life and with restless, uneasy arms is carrying its dead freight on every tide as if seeking a bleak enough shore on which to fling it. But God teaches us when wisely to forget. We should hurt our finest selves if we forced our feelings in this delicate matter and tore where all is so tender; and we should substitute death for life if we stifled sorrow by sacrificing our love and blotting out its memory. The year of God turns round in kindly course. At a set time He returns to every soul in the season of comfort, and some common dayspring will rise with God’s healing in its wings. New love comes with new life. Birds of spring come after the winter, and they nest and sing hard by the graves. Children grow up in the home circle where the old friends died. Summer comes to the garden around the house however long we have kept its windows darkened, and tendrils will take hold and climb up and feel round, and blossomed heads will look in at the lattice and coax us with their beauty and their sweetness. In one guise or another “Manasseh” and “Ephraim” sooner or later insist at every door, and pleasantly intrude in every darkened room, in the house of life; they bring heaven’s new love with them and they open windows of new outlook and doors of new outlet on life; and they who receive

them discover that they are entertaining God's angels un-awares.

Thus we now see lying plain before us the lines along which Joseph moved to his high station beside Pharaoh. No grand start was given him, and he had to rely on his own pace; no showy preparation was assigned him, he was trained within prison bars; and when he had to work, the work was not of his own choosing, but his hand found it to do and he did it with his might. So Joseph might have turned his eyes towards the far line of the distance that hid the hills of his home, and shrunk from the strain and toil which the land of his captivity assigned him. Better, he might have thought, to abide there by the sheepfolds and to hear the bleatings of the flock than to jeopardize my life unto the death for the alien and the stranger in Egypt. But that was not the principle of his life, and that would be a false principle of life for any man to obey. This world may not be our fatherland any more than Egypt was Joseph's, but here we are and here we must work. We have awaked in life to find a great war raging around us—a crisis ever imminent between Satan and God; we have been born in the camp, and must put on armour whenever we can bear it. It is a poor business to turn languidly towards heaven and its rest, and to wish we were there. No matter what we wish, we are *here*, and here to take a side. No one can escape the responsibility when he finds on his either hand the forces of good and evil contending for the mastery; and we venture to say that in the eyes of Eternity the most despicable man will not be he who has boldly and openly opposed the good, but he who has never decided, who has trifled away his life in this earnest world careless whether God or Satan succeeded. The greatest heritage of human life is the commonest; it is put past no one, not the simplest

nor the poorest. The great heritage of a man is not in great opportunities and grand openings of the gates of the world, but in his own human nature—his own capacious self. No one needs more than his own soul and the world's every-day duties to make himself great. Up in any obscurest life may be wrapped the principles and powers of a greatness which it will take all the future to unfold. We may be called to administer no empire nor tide any nation across its emergencies, but each one of us can take those principles which made Joseph great in his second chariot in Egypt, and embody them in his own life, and express them in his own circumstances. And if promotion in life awaits any of us, of this we may be sure—that any road that is to lead us far and raise us high is that road which has its beginning where our feet are standing at this moment; and any work nobler than our present drudgery must arise out of our doing our present task well and putting nobility of motive and effort into it. The motto of surest progress is a very simple one, it is the daily saying to one's self in a thousand little trifles, "*Hoc age*," "Do this."

We see also finer lines than those of Joseph's history. We are shown some of the lines of grace which added beauty to the strength of Joseph's character. The narrative gives us what is not merely accessory, but essential, when it indicates the gentle and sympathetic side of his life; it seems to round off and complete our idea of a shapely and stately manhood by adding the home scene to its portraiture of Joseph. Every bravest man has a tender side to turn to woman and child; every busiest life of fresh usefulness has some retreat upon quiet and rest, and the strongest are they who betimes betake themselves to peace. We all have seen castles battlementing the sheer cliff that defies the sea, and we may have found there some postern-door admitting to garden walks which terrace some slope of green on the

other side, where the warrior within the walls could have quiet thoughts in a quiet hour. Every life should have such a postern-gate to it. For—

'Tis not in battles that from youth we train
The governor who must be wise and good,
And temper with the sternness of the brain
Thoughts motherly and meek as womanhood.
Wisdom doth live with children round her knees;
. these are the degrees
By which true sway doth mount; this is the stalk
True power doth grow on.

ARMSTRONG BLACK.